



Halo Effect Impact on Student Ratings

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Introduction

- E.L. Thorndike (1920) was the first to report on the halo effect as he observed it in the performance ratings of army officers. Due to the presence of halo effect, the integrity of performance ratings are brought into question. Interestingly, employers rely heavily on performance ratings when considering employees for promotion, especially at universities.
- Research about halo effect in ratings of professors has shown significant relationships between a professor's physical attractiveness and vocal clarity and ratings of the teacher's effectiveness (Feeley, 2002; Felton, Mitchell & Stinson, 2004). Although the halo effect is present, universities still use student ratings of professors when making decisions regarding professors' promotions and tenure.
- Though the literature recognizes the presence of the halo effect in student ratings related to physical characteristics of professors it has not examined the impact of biographical information about the professor on ratings of the professor.
- We hypothesized that the type of biographical information provided (positive, neutral, or negative) would impact student ratings of professors; students presented with positive information will rate the professor's effectiveness more positively than students presented with negative information.

Method

- Forty-eight student volunteers (21 males, 27 females), ages 17-52 (mean age = 20.8), were recruited through an online research participation system.
- A 40 item preliminary questionnaire, containing potential biographical information, was administered to ten people to assess which qualities most affected the subjects' perceptions of potential professors.
- Based on the preliminary questionnaire, a packet was created containing a second 15 item questionnaire which used a seven-point Likert-type scale. Also included was a photograph and short biography about a fictitious professor. This information was on the last page of the packet to keep from revealing that there were differing packets.
- In the questionnaire, participants were asked how they anticipated the professor would perform in certain academic domains. Participants' responses to the questions acted as the dependent variable.
- There were three types of biographical information: Positive, Neutral, and Negative (see Figure 1).
- Participants were assigned into the Positive, Negative or Neutral biography groups by block randomization and data were collected over approximately two weeks as the questionnaires were administered.

Negative Biography: He reads his in-class lectures from a PowerPoint presentation. He prefers to use chalkboards rather than marker boards. His tests consist of 100 fill-in-the-blank questions. In his free time, he enjoys woodworking. He also has four sons. He has been divorced twice, and no longer interacts with two of his four sons.

Neutral Biography: He reads his in-class lectures from a PowerPoint presentation. In his free time, he enjoys woodworking. He also has four sons.

Positive Biography: In graduate school, he was mentored by a renowned professor. He reads his in-class lectures from a PowerPoint presentation. In his free time, he enjoys woodworking and attends a variety of on-campus activities with his wife of 40 years. He also has four sons. He was also a mission president.

Figure 1. Biography Types (Positive, Negative, Neutral)

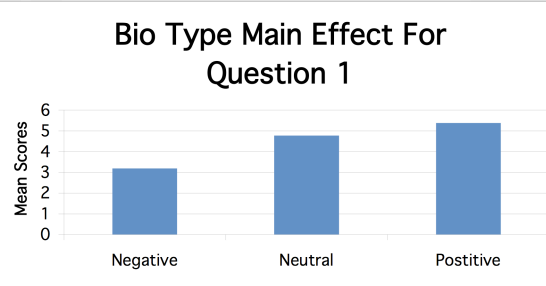


Figure 2. Biography Type Main Effect for Question 1: "This professor would be approachable."

Results

- Ratings on the 15 questions were analyzed using two independent variables: Biography Type (Negative, Neutral, Positive) and Gender (Male, Female). The dependent variable was the score on each question. The alpha level was set at 0.05.
- The Biography Type Main Effect was significant for 6 of 15 questions (see Figure 2). The positive biography elicited the highest scores and the negative biography the lowest scores, indicating the presence of a halo effect in ratings.
- The Gender Main Effect was significant for Question 1 ($F(1,42)=4.463$; $p=0.041$) and Question 7 ($F(1,42)=5.024$; $p=0.03$). Female participants' ratings were more positive than male participants' ratings on these questions.
- The Biography Type x Gender interaction was significant for Question 8 ($F(2,42)=5.080$; $p=0.011$) and Question 10 ($F(2,42)=6.068$; $p=0.005$). However, the overall Biography Type x Gender interaction was non-significant ($F(2,42)=0.218$; $p=0.805$; see Figure 3). Thus, the rating differences between groups on these two questions was accounted for by gender.

Bio Type x Gender Interaction Means

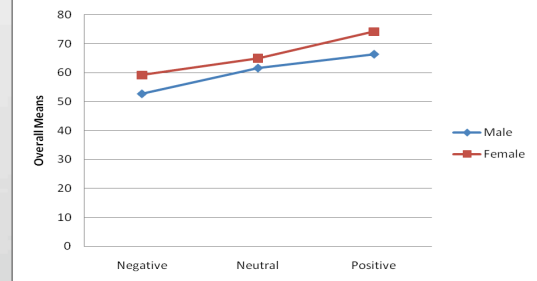


Figure 3. Overall Biography Type x Gender interaction

Conclusion

- As predicted, our results suggested that the participants rated the professor generally high or low according to the positive or negative biography (see Figure 3).
- The positive description of the professor as a former ecclesiastical leader and the negative description of the professor as a divorcee with conflicted familial relationships seemed to be the most important aspect of the biographies.
- In light of past research and this study, we suggest that student rating systems are fundamentally flawed and can be manipulated simply by the biographical information presented to students. We suggest that professors could positively influence student ratings by informing students of previous ecclesiastical roles and positive family relationships. We encourage students to use caution when rating professors to reduce halo effect.
- Additional research could examine the interaction between biography type, gender of the professor, and physical attractiveness. Future research could also examine the impact of differing methods of disseminating biographical information. For example, biographical information of professors could be presented during on-line class registration, in a class syllabus, or during an in-class introduction by the professor.

References

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